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FUTURE SOVIET MILITARY STRATEGY

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FUTURE SOVIET MILITARY STRATEGY

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## Future Soviet Military Strategy

### General

A wide variety of internal and external political, economic, and social factors have coalesced to produce striking change in the Soviet Union and its former satellites. Although no one can predict with any degree of certainty what these changes will ultimately produce, they must be considered as the context for future Soviet military policy, doctrine, and strategy.

Within the Soviet Union economic stagnation has reached the crisis point. The decay of the Soviet economy and ineffective attempts to deal with it have reduced the economy's productivity and, more important in a military sense, denied it the prospect of mastering the rapid technological changes that are sweeping the developed world. Economic crisis has, in turn, fostered political and social turmoil which threatens the fabric of Soviet political life and society. Democratization, unleashed in a conscious attempt to legitimize official programs for economic reform, has concurrently released new political forces which can alter the rigid political structure of the Soviet state, and nationalism, which simultaneously generates both centripetal forces within the Russian nation and centrifugal forces on the part of the Soviet Union's national republics. Democratization has also severely undermined the power and authority of its natural targets, the Communist Party and the nomenklatura.<sup>1</sup>

These economic and political crises have, in turn, underscored vividly the class and ethnic nature of the Soviet state, exacerbated class, ethnic, and religious distinctions, and fostered virtual low-level social warfare among classes and nationalities. This is a particularly vexing problem in light of the impending minority of Great Russians within their Soviet state.

All of these forces, singly or in combination, will affect both the nature of the Soviet state and the shape and form of its military establishment in the future, as the Soviet state strives to achieve a consensus regarding its position in and relation to Europe and the rest of the world.

While internal factors will condition the Soviet Union's reaction to the world in a political and military sense, the main future variable is the structure of the international arena itself. There, major changes have occurred and are occurring that the Soviet must take into account as they formulate their policies and strategies. The Soviet perspective is now recognizing the following factors:

-- The arms race of the 1980s which, while creating enormous economic pressures on both sides, failed to accord military



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advantage to the Soviets (and, in fact, may have accorded advantage to the West);

-- The changing international political balance, characterized, in part, by the increased political and economic power of Europe (EEC) and Japan; the opening of China to limited Western influence; the unleashing of politically potent religious forces in the Middle East and potentially in southern Asia; and the continued pauperization and political weakness of friendly Third World governments;

-- The new technological revolution, principally in cybernetics, which, because of an inability to compete, places the Soviet Union at increasing disadvantage;

-- The world-wide revival of nationalism and its negative effects on the status quo;

-- The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and, with it, diminished Soviet influence in Europe (in a Cold War sense);

-- The unification of Germany;

-- The limited success of Soviet-sponsored or supported wars of national liberation, the curtailment or asserted abandonment of many military assistance programs, and the ensuing political and economic enfeebling of Soviet client states world-wide.

All of these complex internal and external factors have impelled change within the Soviet Union, and these changes have evolved in a dialectical sense with one generating another. Gorbachev's initial economic program of acceleration [uskoreniye], which was designed to speed up economic activity, failed and instead underscored the need for openness and debate of vital issues. The policy of perestroyka followed, a revitalization program of both the economy and the military, which, like a germ developing in a petri dish, had to be accompanied by a program of glasnost' to lend it credence and vitality. When it became clear that institutional constraints threatened to throttle perestroyka, the ensuing program of democratization [demokratizatsiya] sought to break the institutional log-jam and legitimize reform.

Each of these stages has reinforced the dialectical truth that all trends are interrelated, and one cannot have genuine progress in one realm without commensurate progress in other important realms. This truth propelled Gorbachev in the spring of 1990 to embrace reform on all fronts, with inherent risks, while attempting to control the entire process through the new institution of President of the Soviet Union. The military corollary of these fundamental internal and external political, economic, and social changes has been a revision of Soviet military policy and declared Soviet intent to implement a defensive military doctrine. That, in turn, requires articulation of a new military strategy.

Soviet future military strategy will reflect four basic realities: first, Soviet national interests and objectives; second, the nature of perceived threats; third, Soviet perception of the nature of future war; and fourth, the potential of the material base (economy, manpower, etc.). As the Soviets study these realities, they are driven by habit and inclination to consider what the past has to offer in the way of solutions. They understand that study of the past offers no panaceas. But it does offer hints as to proper action at a time when conditions existed similar to those existing today or in the future.

Once the Soviets fully understand these realities and resolve their most acute problems, their military strategy must address the critical issues of peacetime strategic force posture, force generation, strategic deployment, and the nature and conduct of strategic operations in future wars. This analysis focuses on the principal issues of strategic force posture and strategic deployment and also addresses the related questions of peacetime force strength, manning, disposition, and readiness; force generation during transition from peace to war (mobilization); and strategic force deployment and concentration.

#### National Interests and Defining the Threat

Whereas in the past many in the West have assumed the USSR's national interests and policy objectives envisioned the ultimate destruction of capitalism, current realities argue that Soviet interests today focus more on insuring the security and survival of the Soviet state. Whether or not Soviet national interests during the Cold War (1949 -- 1989) were aggressive, there is now considerable similarity between Soviet interests today, and probably in the future as well, and similar Soviet interests in the 1920s and 30s. Specifically, there is a strong case to be made for the defensive nature of Soviet national policy in general and for Soviet military policy in particular. In the last analysis, the future strategic posture of the Soviet Union will settle the issue.

One reality concerning Soviet military strategy which is as true today as it was yesterday is the fact that it reflects the perceived threat. Threat analysis in a time of change is difficult at best, and it inherently involves defining a range of threats and then fashioning a strategy which deals with a combination of the most likely and most dangerous of them. One can postulate a range of future international political relationships differentiated from one another by the degree to which each poses a threat to the Soviet Union. Four principal threat variants based on these relationships may evolve, listed here in descending order of favorability. The listing of nations within each variant are partial, and obviously tentative.<sup>2</sup>

Threat Variants  
Variant 1 (Best Case)

Characteristics: Economically, and to a lesser degree, politically unified Europe with German, Soviet, and East European states, participation. Abolition of all military alliances and general disarmament of all European nations. Stability based on status quo in Asia. This variant has never before existed.

National Attitudes

Group 1: Potentially hostile to the Soviet Union: (Japan, China, Iran, Afghanistan [if Mujahadin rules], Pakistan)

Group 2: Neutral or ambivalent: (Great Britain, France, Germany, U.S.A., some eastern European states)

Group 3: Friendly to the Soviet Union: (some eastern European states)

Variant 2 (Satisfactory Case)

Characteristics: NATO as a reduced-scale political alliance without German participation. Unified, neutralized, and partially demilitarized Germany. Soviet Union with limited bilateral political, economic, or military agreements with selected Eastern European nations. Continued U.S. security role in Asia and Pacific with growing Japanese participation. This somewhat resembles political conditions existing in the 1920s.

National Attitudes

Group 1: Potentially hostile to the Soviet Union: (U.S.A., Great Britain, France, Japan)

Group 2: Neutral or ambivalent: (Germany, some eastern European states)

Group 3: Friendly to the Soviet Union: (some eastern European states)

Variant 3 (Unsatisfactory Status Quo)

Characteristics: Potentially hostile or hostile NATO within CFE limitations with participation by unified Germany. Soviet bilateral agreements with selected East European states. Continued U.S. security in Asia and the Pacific shared with Japan. This continues many of the unpleasant features of Cold War relationships.

National Attitudes

Group 1: Hostile or potentially hostile to Soviet Union: (NATO nations, Japan, some eastern European states)

Group 2: Neutral or ambivalent: (some eastern European states)

Group 3: Friendly to Soviet Union: (some eastern European states)

#### Variant 4 (Worst Case)

Characteristics: NATO -dissolved and replaced by bilateral political and military agreements between U.S., France, and Great Britain. Unified, militarized revisionist Germany. Competition between Soviet Union and Germany for influence in Eastern Europe. Remilitarized, expansionist Japan and diminished U.S. influence in Asia and the Pacific. These international relationships, to some degree, resemble conditions in the 1930s.

#### National Attitudes

Group 1: Hostile to Soviet Union: (Germany, Japan, some eastern European states)

Group 2\*: Potentially hostile to Soviet Union: (U.S.A., Great Britain, France)

Group 3\*: Neutral: (some eastern European states)

Group 4: Friendly to Soviet Union: (some eastern European states)

\* This is a particularly volatile relationship, in that, depending on Japanese and German policies, nations in groups 2 and 3 could become friendly with the Soviet Union.

Juxtaposed against these threat variants based on international relationships and national attitudes are a series of alternatives regarding the Soviet internal situation, which can have an influence on the former. Although there are numerous possibilities, they can be lumped into three general categories, each with a specific set of probable impacts on the threat variants and vice versa.

Alternative 1: Gorbachev or a successor succeeds in reforming the Soviet state. This would probably entail some positive economic reform and a degree of democratization, which could involve the outright loss of the Baltic States, Moldavia, and possibly other regions, and the evolution of a federal structure which would govern the relationship between existing republics and the Soviet Union. International variants 1, and 2 would facilitate this process, variant 3 would only marginally affect it, and variant 4 could definitely inhibit the process. On the other hand, such a process within the Soviet Union would tend to foster the development of variants 1 and 2 internationally. This alternative has no precedents.<sup>3</sup>



Alternative 2: The reforms of Gorbachev or his successor fail and either democratic revolution or authoritarian reaction ensues. Although this might occur in any circumstance for internal reasons, international variants 3 or 4 could speed this outcome. A "democratic" revolution would likely fragment the Soviet Union and contribute to international variant 1 or 2. Return to a more authoritarian regime (rule by party, police, union, military, or a combination of all four) would resist national fragmentation, probably by force, and promote international variants 3 and possibly 4. In addition, there is no guarantee continued authoritarianism would stave off ultimate revolution or reform. The precedents for this alternative are, on the one hand, February 1917 and, on the other, Stalin's authoritarianism or that of his successors.

Alternative 3: Gorbachev or his successors muddle through with enough reform to maintain a shaky status quo. In this instance the Soviet government will have to contend with continuous, long-term economic, political, and ethnic problems. These internal contradictions would be exacerbated by international variants 3 and 4 and would, in turn, certainly hinder achievement of variant 1, and possibly variant 2. This characterizes earlier failed Soviet attempts at reform (1954, 1960, 1970s).

If one were to distill from all four threat variants all conceivable threats, they would include the following:

All Conceivable Threats: 1995

1. Continued full NATO threat to the Soviet Union;
2. Emergence of a hostile unified Germany;
3. Strategic nuclear and peripheral threat by the U.S.A.;
4. Residual threat from a truncated NATO;
5. Foreign support of ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union;
6. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Western intervention;
7. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Soviet domestic implications;
8. Domestic ethnic unrest;
9. Nuclear and chemical weapons proliferation in hostile or potentially hostile border states;
10. Transnational threats with military implications.

In terms of likelihood and desirability, these variants break down as follows:

- Variants 1 and 2 least desirable
- Variant 4 desirable and most likely
- Variants 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10 possible
- Variants 7 and 8 probable

Since it is awkward, if not impossible, to predict one's own demise, the Soviet General Staff must plan on the basis of some sort of stability being maintained. Likewise, the Soviets cannot anticipate or meet every threat. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that threat variant 2, or at least variant 3, will result. If so, it is also reasonable to assume that threat variants 2 or 3 are most likely and, hence, can provide a prudent basis upon which to base military policy and strategy. In fact, it is these two variants that Soviet policy makers and strategists are today addressing. They would like to see variant 2 result, but must prudently plan for the circumstances of variant 3. The trick is to encourage the evolution of variant 2 (or even 1) by formulating a strategy (and hence a threat for the West) which does not impel Western powers to continue variant 3, but still satisfies Soviet security needs if variant 3 should persist. In this respect, and in many others, the 1920s model looks increasingly attractive.

From threat variants 2 and 3 one can distill a finite list of possible threats, which provide a reasonable, and safe, basis upon which to formulate a military strategy. This pared-down list might be as follows:

#### Possible Threats: 1995

1. Strategic nuclear and peripheral threat by the U.S.A.;
  2. Residual threat from a reduced-strength NATO;
  3. Foreign support of ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union;
  4. Domestic ethnic unrest;
  5. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Western intervention;
  6. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Soviet domestic implications;
  7. Nuclear and chemical weapons proliferation in hostile or potentially hostile border states;
  8. Transnational threats with military implications.
- Soviet military strategy must be prepared to cope with these potential threats.

## Military Strategy

Based on existing and potential threats and their emerging view of the nature of future war, Soviet theorists must develop a military strategy which suits the political-military aims of the state. It is not unreasonable to assume that those aims, given political and economic realities, are essentially defensive. If so, that defensive posture must be adequate to meet potential threats. We earlier suggested that the threat, a combination of threat variants two (satisfactory) and three (unsatisfactory status quo), consisted of eight principal elements:

1. Strategic nuclear and peripheral threat by U.S.;
2. Residual threat from a reduced strength NATO;
3. Foreign support of ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union;
4. Domestic ethnic unrest (internal threat)
5. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Western intervention;
6. Unrest in Eastern Europe with Soviet domestic implications;
7. Nuclear and chemical weapons proliferation in hostile or potentially hostile border states;
8. Transnational threats with military implications.

Since the last five elements are essentially internal or of an indirect nature, Soviet military strategists must deal primarily with the first three elements. These then represent the general threat the General Staff and Soviet political authorities must contend with. The nuclear threat and the conventional threat posed by reduced-strength NATO are familiar ones whose nature is now being altered to some extent by the arms control process. That process, as it develops, provides a rational mechanism for measuring and, if necessary, scaling down the seriousness of the threat. The third element, foreign support for ethnic unrest is a new dimension, which requires further clarification and definition. It also merges with the internal issue of maintaining order within the Soviet Union, which the Soviets anticipate and hope will be a matter for internal security (MVD) forces.

Given the more complex Soviet typology of war, the three most likely threats to the Soviet Union (strategic nuclear and peripheral U.S. threat, residual threat of NATO, and foreign support of ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union) and the two likely threat variations (number two: demilitarization of NATO --

neutrality of Germany and number three: status quo with reduced NATO military threat), Soviet strategists must determine a range of war scenarios in terms of threat, form, and timing. Since variant two is far less threatening, it is only prudent to plan on the basis of variant number three. In increasing order of seriousness, this variant could result in the following spectrum of hostile action against the Soviet Union:

Case 1: covert or overt support of ethnic unrest within the Soviet Union by bordering states (China, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Rumania, Poland, Finland);

Case 2: covert or overt support of ethnic unrest or indigenously generated unrest within the Soviet Union by bordering states with great power assistance (Japan, U.S., Britain, France, Germany);

Case 3: military intervention within the Soviet Union for any reason by NATO or any combination of great powers;

Case 4: deliberate major conventional or nuclear attack on the Soviet Union by opposing alliances or the U.S. in concert with other powers;

Case 5: attack of unpredictable scope resulting from long-term crisis between major powers and the Soviet Union.

Analysis of the first four cases within the context of current and prospective arms limitations and other political and economic negotiations argues that the likelihood of their occurring is inversely proportional to their seriousness. In short:

- 1) Nuclear or conventional attack by NATO or the U.S. is unlikely and will become less so as CFE negotiations progress;
- 2) For the same reasons as cited in (1), direct Western military intervention in the Soviet Union is unlikely;
- 3) Probable unrest in the Soviet Union is likely to afford increasing opportunity for foreign intervention in virtually all border regions, but, in particular, in Eastern Europe, and in southern and eastern Asia;
- 4) Planners must keep in mind the possibility of variant 5 ("creeping up to war" during crisis) and tailor the Soviet strategy posture accordingly.

While the first three judgements support Soviet desires to truncate their armed forces' structure and reduce its readiness.

posture, uncertainties associated with the fourth possibility will act as a natural brake on this process.

Based on this analysis, the geographical aspect of the threat will change considerably. During the Cold War, the principal threat to the Soviet Union emanated from the west (Europe), and only during the late 1960s did a new threat emerge in the east (China). Thus, Soviet strategists formulated a strategic posture and war plans geared to protecting those two high-priority regions.<sup>4</sup> Given the altered threats, these priorities will likely change. While CFE agreements produce (and in fact mandate) a reduction in Soviet strategic strength oriented westward, the Soviets will have to continue to maintain defenses in the east and, in addition, look carefully at their defensive posture in the south. These new realities argue for increased Soviet attention to building up strategic reserves in areas outside CFE guidelines regions, such as east of the Urals.<sup>5</sup> While satisfying CFE requirements, a build-up east of the Urals will also help the Soviets cope with new strategic threats to border regions in central and eastern Asia.

This geographical reapportionment of strategic resources in response to an altered threat will require the Soviets to rethink their geographical framework for planning and conducting war -- specifically the current TVD concept.

The Soviets must also judge how future wars will begin, specifically, to what extent traditional views on that issue remain valid today and will do so in the future? As before, the central issue remains the ability to secure the strategic initiative. The traditional view originated during the 1920s, governed Soviet strategic thought prior to the Second World War and, although somewhat modified, remained valid during the Second World War and Cold War. The variants were:

- 1) Mobilization and concentration of forces by all contending parties prior to war;
- 2) Partial mobilization and concentration prior to war, but completed during war;
- 3) One nation attacks to achieve operational-tactical advantage, while its opponent mobilizes and concentrates;
- 4) One nation attacks by surprise to achieve strategic advantage before its opponent can mobilize and concentrate. The most dangerous new facet of this variant is the nuclear "first strike."

During the 1920s the Soviets planned on the basis of variants 1 and 2 and during the 1930s on the basis of variants 2 and 3. On the eve of World War II, variant 4 matured in the form of German

blitzkrieg, and the Soviets were only partially prepared to deal with it. Since the end of the Second World War, and particularly since the appearance of nuclear weapons, variants 3 and 4 have become the preeminent Soviet concerns in an alliance sense, for they have forced Soviet strategists to address such concepts as "first-strikes," which vastly increases the importance of the strategic initiative.

Soviet strategy in the early 1960s focused on denying any opposing nation or alliance a first-strike capability, and in the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet concept of the theater-strategic offensive was designed to counter variants three and four in both a nuclear and a conventional sense.

Today, as the force reduction process unfolds, Soviet military strategists must study a wider array of variations. They must remain concerned about dealing with a nuclear first-strike in the sense of variant 4, and they must also deal with the potential for full or partial mobilization and concentration of enemy forces during periods of crisis (a modern variation of "creeping up to war"). In addition, they must be prepared to deal with new variations, i.e., ethnic unrest and foreign support of domestic unrest with no overt mobilization or with only partial mobilization by a foreign power (in particular, in the case of a neighbor possessing a large peacetime standing army). In essence, they face the threat of revolutionary or guerilla war on their own territory, with or without covert foreign support. This prospect blurs the traditional threat indicator of mobilization.

Soviet study of these questions will proceed within the context of the likely threats outlined above and the national and geographical sources and foci of those threats. The ensuing analytical process will determine Soviet judgements regarding armed forces strength, strategic posture, strategic deployment, and force generation.

#### ENDNOTES

1. The nomenklatura is the finite group of party members in rank order who occupy key party, governmental, economic, and other positions within virtually all Soviet institutions. It, in essence, represents an upper class of communist "nobility."

2. The listed grouping of nations are representative and by no means include all nations. Assignment to a category is subject to a variety of finite political and economic conditions.

3. One could argue that the Soviet Union faced similar conditions after it signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). By virtue of that treaty and other postwar conditions (Civil War

and Allied intervention), for varying lengths of time, the Soviet Union lost possession of the Baltic states, the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbazhan, the Far East, and Tanu Tuva. As soon as the Soviets regained their strength, most of these regions were re-incorporated into the Soviet Union.

4. In August 1969 the Soviet Union added a sixteenth military district by separating the Central Asian Military District from the Turkestan Military District, ostensibly to respond to an increased threat from China.

5. In 1989 the Soviets again combined the Central Asian and Turkestan Military Districts. The recent combination of the Ural and Volga Military Districts into a single Ural-Volga Military District reduced the overall number of military districts to fourteen. This marks a diminution in the perceived threat from China, and perhaps increased Soviet concern for their southern flank..